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Honors Capstone Project

Honors Capstone Project Executive Summary: Exploration of the Meaning of Power as it relates to American County Characteristics

Introduction

The research question that was the engine to my honors capstone project was why do counties in the US have the names and boundaries that they have? I was particularly interested in this question because prior to this project I really did not know very much about counties in the United States, and I was intrigued by the naming of counties in the front range of Colorado and Wyoming. The thesis statement that I developed for this project was, county boundaries, shapes and names in the US are determined by a complex mix of factors such as politics, physical geography, the development of technology, economics, and historical occurrences. The thesis statement was brought about by the research that I conducted with some help from my honors capstone project mentor Dr. Richard Vercoe as well as Mr. Kurt Knieriem, Larimer County Commissioner John Kefalas, and Professor Fred Shelley.

Literature review

I was able to use a plethora of online works for data collection on this project. Many of these included the state maps with counties outlined and labeled which I used to gain a body of information on county names. The sources for the following counties are in the sources cited at the end of the document (“California”; “Alaska”; “Hawaii Counties”; “Colorado”; “Map of

Wyoming”; “New Mexico”; “Idaho”; “Utah Counties”; “Kansas”; “Iowa”; “Minnesota”; “Wisconsin”; “Illinois”; “Ohio”; “Indiana”; “Texas Counties Map”; “Arkansas”; “Tennessee”; “Kentucky”; “Alabama”; “Georgia”; “Delaware”; “Virginia”; “Maryland”; “New York”; “Pennsylvania”; “Attorney and Lawyer Directory”; “Maine”; “Missouri”; “Massachusetts”). I also utilized national maps which assisted me in gaining data on both county names, shapes, and sizes as well as delineating which regions this data was coming from (US Census Bureau; Blake; Jones). Furthermore, in my quest for finding data on county shapes and sizes I also came upon a video which depicted the development of county boundaries in the US as early as the 1600s (AtlasHCBP). I was also able to study some regional and national maps that I found on Instagram which were helpful in further understanding population and naming dynamics in county characteristics (US Census Bureau and Business Insider; Fanmaps; global_map_posts; maps.are.amazing).

Obviously, my work was not only confined to maps and other graphics but also it included more word-based works, one of which was key to my understanding of county density in states as well as their size (Let’s Go LA). There were other articles that were key in assisting me in learning more about county names, some of which were very comprehensive, sharing the meaning behind the names of each county in the state while others were more focused on one county, place name, or unique county characteristic in particular (Auricchio; Carson; “Cherokee County Commission Alabama.”; “Clinton county”; “Clinton”; Cooksey; “County Statistics of the United States.”; “County Overview.”; “Dallas: Association of Arkansas Counties.” ; Erisman; ExploreKYHistory Team; Ferguson; Illinois State Archives; Healy; “History of the County - about Clinton County, Iowa.”; “The History of Clinton County, OH.”; “How Did Our 58 Counties Get Their Names?”; “How the Counties Were Named.”; “Iowa County Map with

County Seat Cities.”; Jennings; Johnson; Kids Encyclopedia Facts; Logan; Long; Maryland State Archives; Maxwell; “Montgomery County's History.”; “Native Americans, Maryland.”; “Tennessee”; Paige; Runnells; “Union County.”; US Census Bureau; “Commemorative Custer”; “Chapter 76”; “Boundaries in Kentucky”; Winsa). One of these sources was also key in building my knowledge about the Pueblo population base in New Mexico (Native American Election Information Program). Additionally, some of the more core sources were books written by Alexander Murphy and Michael Foucault, who was being interviewed in his book.

It should also be mentioned that I was sufficiently fortunate to have been able to interview some individuals. One of the people I interviewed was my high school history teacher, Mr. Kurt Knierim of Rocky Mountain High School in Fort Collins, Colorado. Another one of the men I interviewed was Larimer County Commissioner John Kefalas. A third individual that I interviewed was one Professor Fred Shelley of the University of Oklahoma. I should also note that I received some help from Professor Emeritus Dr. Gerald Webster who sent me some helpful articles that talked about county history, naming, purpose, size, and density, within the state of Kentucky (“Commemorative Custer”; “Chapter 76”; “Boundaries in Kentucky”). Dr. Vercoe was also helpful in teaching me about indigenous influence in the naming of states and counties.

Methods

In regard to how I went about accomplishing this project I took several steps. I wanted to conduct research which was influenced by my degree program of Geography, and this step was completed in the spring of 2022. I began researching information for my project starting with some online sources and continuing by reading *Power and Knowledge* as well as *Geography: Why it matters* (Foucault; Murphy). These steps were completed over the summer of 2022. I continued searching online sources for data that helped me compile data for the project and then

started drafting scripts for the episodes. Along the way I would meet up with my honors mentor to plan out next steps in the project as well as sharing and amending work I had completed thus far. This stage of the project was completed in the fall of 2022.

During the winter of 2022 I worked on making a list of interview candidates and reaching out to them. Unfortunately, only one of my original ideal three candidates agreed to interview with me, and this was Mr. Knierim, but I was still able to receive some relevant research articles from Dr. Webster and an interview candidate that did agree to be interviewed by me from Alexander Murphy, which was Professor Fred Shelley (Wright 1A; 1C). After this I conducted two interviews in person with Mr. Knierim who recommended me to reach out to Commissioner Kefalas and one of the interviews was over the phone with Professor Shelley (Wright 1A). After this I continued to write scripts, have them edited, record and edit episodes in studio Coe on Adobe Audition, and then wrap up the project by preparing an oral presentation for research day and this executive summary. I decided to carry out my project with the medium of a podcast because I knew that podcasts in general were becoming a more popular medium and in doing so, I developed my editing skills in Adobe Audition.

Summary of findings

In terms of what I found from the research that I conducted for this project I was able to gain a vast amount of knowledge on the subject matter. Since my research spanned a massive amount of area, I was able to obtain not only a considerable breadth of knowledge but also a serious depth of knowledge as I learned much of the meanings and processes behind those characteristics (SEE COUNTY SOURCES; Wright 1C; 1B; 1A; Auricchio; Carson; “Cherokee County Commission Alabama.”; “Clinton county”; ‘Clinton’; Cooksey; “County Statistics of the United States.”; “County Overview.”; “Dallas: Association of Arkansas Counties.” ; Erisman;

ExploreKYHistory Team; Ferguson; Illinois State Archives; Healy; "History of the County - about Clinton County, Iowa."; "The History of Clinton County, OH."; "How Did Our 58 Counties Get Their Names?"; "How the Counties Were Named."; "Iowa County Map with County Seat Cities."; Jennings; Johnson; Kids Encyclopedia Facts; Logan; Long; Maryland State Archives; Maxwell; "Montgomery County's History."; "Native Americans, Maryland."; Paige; Runnells; "Union County."; US Census Bureau; "Commemorative Custer"; "Chapter 76"; "Boundaries in Kentucky"; Winsa). In terms of some of the content that I learned about, my knowledge of county names was augmented significantly. Firstly, when I began researching county names, I noticed very quickly that the vast majority of them fell into the following categories of Euro-Americans, Native Americans, natural features, religious references, and names from other places (SEE COUNTY SOURCES). An important distinction here is that the two categories with easily the largest number of names that I could identify were names influenced by previous Euro-Americans and natural features (SEE COUNTY SOURCES). As a matter of fact, I observed a fascinating phenomenon where many of the names that were influenced by Native Americans were also inspired by natural features thereby creating an inherent overlap in the categories (Healy).

Regarding what I was able to find with the shapes and sizes of the counties, there were also lots of opportunities for learning with this as well. One phenomenon that I observed was the shrinking of counties as one moves eastward and the enlargement of them as one moves westward (Jones; Let's Go LA). This also impacted the density of the number of counties inside of states and regarding shapes there were more circular shaped counties in the central regions of the eastern part of the country while moving a little westward there were more square shaped counties as well as jagged boundaries (Jones; Let's Go LA). The counties in the more central and

eastern part of the country also tended to be considerably smaller than those in Maine and Florida which had counties with more uneven boundaries (Jones; Let's Go LA).

Finally, and perhaps the most important part of my findings is the why behind the county characteristics. With the county names I learned from Knierim that county names need to be approved by congress and that many of these names were chosen in the 1800s (Wright 1C; AtlasHCBP). Since, as Shelley pointed out, counties were invented in England, many of the names were to “honor the power” of “(presently) dead white guys” as they were the ones who were building the counties (Wright 1C). Additionally, Names were passed on from place to place, influenced by the people who originally lived there or were there by forced relocation, which were native peoples, as well as the natural features that resided there (Wright 1B; 1A). Many of the Euro-American names were those of politicians and war heroes which would have been very pleasing to the audience of the US Congress which of course supported more “patriotic” names (Wright 1C; Blake).

Personal reflection

Academically speaking there is plenty for me to reflect on as this project took me lots of time to complete. First and foremost, I would like to mention how much I learned from this project, which was a considerable amount. With this, not only did I develop a massive amount of knowledge of characteristics of American counties, but I also was able to develop and hone my skills in interviewing, audio editing and recording, writing, and researching. I gained this knowledge and heightened these skills by researching and by carrying out the project as they all were vital to me successfully completing the project. Additionally, in bringing this project to fruition I was able to strengthen the connection I had with my degree program, Geography, because of how I was able to increase the strength of my knowledge about how a key element of

Geography, why there is power in place, is the reality of governance over time and space (Vercoe; Murphy).

In the making of this project there were both pleasant and bothersome moments as there are for just about any project. One of the bothersome elements of this project was starting it because I was busy focusing on other elements of my life and therefore pushed the start date of the project. Another one of the more bothersome moments was the challenges associated with finding people to interview and be my honors capstone project mentor as there was some rejection that I experienced during this process. Another struggle I encountered during this process was getting my proposal to get to a solid place which took many rounds of revision and therefore time to finally complete. Sparing time for this project was sometimes tricky too as I was working, looking for future employment, taking classes, and having a social life. When it came to editing the recordings, this was encumbered by me working off of a flash drive for the first three episodes which slowed down my ability to edit the tracks.

However, there were also plenty of enjoyable moments of the project as well. For example, I liked learning about the principle subject matter of the project, especially county names. Moreover, I thought it to be very rewarding listening to the men I interviewed when they gave me responses with information I had not yet learned (Wright 1C; 1A; 1B). My honors mentor was very helpful and knowledgeable on the subject matter which was very enjoyable for me. During the podcast editing process I found cutting up tracks to be very satisfying especially when the software was allowing me to move at a quicker pace. Further, the assistance that I received from the lab assistants in Coe Library and staff from Studio Coe was absolutely essential to my success on this project, which I was happy with their help.

Looking back, there were several decisions that I wish I had made differently. For instance, instead of using a plethora of websites to find the county names for each state I wish I had rather used one website with all of the county names for every state. Also, I think it would have been much wiser of me to transition my recordings and interviews onto the Studio Coe computer storage as opposed to keeping it primarily on my flash drive. Another adjustment I wish I had made sooner was moving my recording device, my iPhone, closer to the interviewees, so there would be less or no typing that could be heard in the interview recordings.

Looking forward however, there are plenty of opportunities and manners in which the research of this project can be advanced in the future. One of these ways is via researching the rest of the county names in the states that I did not yet cover in this project. Another way is through diving deeper into the sources that Commissioner Kefalas referred to me (Wright 1B). A third manner in which this can be achieved is by using sources such as Google Scholar and Ebsco Host to learn more about county characteristics and history.

Conclusion

For this project I have attempted to answer the question of, why do counties in the US have the names and boundaries that they have? I have concluded that county boundaries, shapes and names in the US are determined by a complex mix of factors such as politics, physical geography, the development of technology, economics, and historical occurrences. My personal touch or rather addition to this project has not only been the work that I have poured into it but also that I am not just a robot collecting data. On the contrary, it is my inherent uniqueness as a human that has been partially shaped through my experiences that allowed me to make notice of counties that I recognized, my learning that I decided to put in the scripts as well as having my voice and my editing decisions in Adobe Audition.

I have some plans for this project, some of which are academic and others of which are personal. Academically, I plan to deliver an oral presentation on this project later this spring at Undergraduate Research on campus at the University of Wyoming. I then plan to respond to any edits the project needs and then anticipate that I will turn my project into the WyoScholar Repository which in doing so will allow me to have the Honors Capstone Project requirement checked off my degree evaluation. Personally, I plan to share the podcast with friends and family, as well as posting it on my social media platforms of Instagram and Snapchat. My hope is for this project to educate those who listen to it about counties in the US and for it to be a tool that people can use to teach others about the subject matter as well as for it to be increasing in popularity so it can have a greater impact.

Appendix

The questions that I asked each interviewee are as follows:

- 1) Aside from them (counties) being voting districts, what are the importance of counties in the US today?
- 2) Would you tell me what you know about the history of counties in general?
- 3) Would you tell me what you know about the history of counties in the US in terms of their transformation and formation regarding borders?
- 4) So, I noticed a phenomenon where we have more circular shaped counties from Pennsylvania to Louisiana and my question to you is, do you know anything about why this is (Jones)?
- 5) I also saw that there are more square shaped counties from Eastern Texas to Michigan and similarly I ask what is your knowledge about this phenomenon (Jones)?

- 6) I also observed that there are counties with more jagged borders and obviously some of these are from natural boundaries like rivers and lakes but for the other ones do you have any knowledge of what lead to those boundaries (Jones)?
- 7) It seems as though population influenced the size of counties as east of the Mississippi river counties tend to be much smaller than those west of it and obviously there is a higher total population and population density in the eastern US than there is in the Western; however, I was wondering if there were any other dynamics at play in influencing county sizes (*US Census Bureau and Business Insider; Fanmaps*).
- 8) If by this point you have not specifically referred to it in your previous answers, would you elaborate on the power dynamics that influenced the development of counties and their names in the US?
- 9) In what I was able to immediately notice in my research, there was an overwhelming majority of counties named after European Americans, specifically those that were involved in US government and military as well as natural features while much less were named after native American peoples and religious references (Blake). Do you have any insight as to why this might be (Blake)?
- 10) Would you explain the present processes to amend county shapes, sizes, and names? So, if someone wanted to change a county name, size, or shape, what would they have to do, what would have to happen for this to occur? Obviously, the rules differ from state to state so you can take your pick in describing the rules for any state you would like.
- 11) Is there any other information you would like to share with me about counties and their history?

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